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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 003062

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/MARCHESE/SINGH

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [KDEM](#) [LE](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: SPECULATING ABOUT HIZBALLAH'S RALLY

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

1. (S) Hizballah is applying pressure to Lebanese from all political factions to show up at "the largest rally in Lebanon's history" tomorrow (9/22), by hinting that those who don't share in the collective celebration of Lebanon's "divine victory" must be Israeli collaborators. Syria, according to Military Intelligence Chief Georges Khoury, is more direct, by ordering its loyalists, and Palestinians from the camps, to swell the ranks in a show of intimidation. Most people believe that the demonstration, no matter how large and frightening in appearance, will not turn violent: Nasrallah presumably wants to intimidate other Lebanese -- and the world -- by showing how many people he can assemble and control. With no one knowing whether Nasrallah will show up in person or what his message will be, much speculation revolves around the content of his speech: will he back the ouster of Siniora's cabinet in favor of a national unity cabinet? Aoun for President? Besides hoping to reverse the perception that Hizballah's support is declining, we believe that Nasrallah is also using this rally to stop progress toward implementation of the international tribunal for Hariri's assassination. End summary and comment.

"LARGEST RALLY IN LEBANON'S HISTORY:
BUT WILL NASRALLAH SHOW UP?"

2. (SBU) Lebanon's usually hyperactive political life is in suspended animation for the moment, as everyone waits to see what the 9/22 Hizballah rally will bring. Hizballah bills it as "the largest demonstration in Lebanese history," meaning that the aim is more than the rally that previously enjoyed that honor, the estimated million people who showed up for the March 14, 2005 "Cedar Revolution" in Beirut's Martyrs' Square. Beirut media today (9/21) is filled with images of Hizballah activists setting up hundreds of thousands of chairs in a cleared area of Beirut's devastated southern suburbs. One of the key questions people are asking is whether Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah will dare defy Israel's vow to kill him at any opportunity and show up in person. Hizballah erected soaring television screens on the site, which could be used under either a no-show scenario or an actual appearance.

AIMED AT REVERSING HIZBALLAH'S DECLINING SUPPORT
-- AND INTIMIDATING THOSE WHO QUESTION HIZBALLAH

3. (SBU) The consensus among Embassy contacts is that

Hizballah's Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah has several goals in calling this pre-Ramadan demonstration. First, he wants to reverse the growing perception that Hizballah is losing ground, as the losses suffered by Lebanon in the July-August conflict sink in and people begin to question whether the "divine victory" was worth the price. Second, the massive numbers expected are designed not only to revive Nasrallah's base but intimidate those Lebanese who want to see Hizballah's power further diminished. Most people dismiss the chance that the demonstration will turn violent, believing that Nasrallah prefers to leave Lebanon (and the world) with the impression that he, and he alone, can produce so many people and control them, too -- with the not-so-subtle underlying message being that he could easily incite the crowd into taking physical action, if others would make too many demands of Hizballah.

TRYING TO CORNER ALL TO SHOW UP
-- OR RISK BEING BRANDED AS "COLLABORATORS"

14. (C) In marketing its demonstration, Hizballah has succeeded in cornering other Lebanese politicians, by inviting all parties and movements to participate in what they are describing as a collective celebration of the "divine victory" over Israel. Everyone who participated in this victory are welcome, says the Hizballah propaganda. March 14 politicians are in a particular bind: if they go, they end up becoming part of the propaganda tool as Hizballah shows it can turn people out in force. If they decline, they can be accused of collaboration with Israel, of having wished Israel to have won. Minister of Social Affairs Nayla Mouawad predicted that Nasrallah's rhetoric regarding the March 14 politicians may depend entirely on whether March 14 is

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represented at the rally or not. In her theory, Nasrallah will hold back in his criticism and appeal to national unity if March 14 turns out in sufficient strength. But -- as she expects -- few or none go, then Nasrallah might unleash his fury. (PM Siniora has told us, and said publicly, that he will not go.)

SYRIA ISSUES ORDERS: SHOW UP

15. (S) Military intelligence (G-2) chief General Georges Khoury, dining with the Ambassador and DATT on 9/20, noted that Hizballah and Syria are taking no chances with the crowd. First, Syria has instructed the Palestinians who dance to Syria's tune to show up, potentially swelling the ranks by several hundred thousand if the refugee camps empty out. (Khoury noted that the Lebanese Armed Forces are adding checkpoints to look for wanted Palestinians who might try to leave the camps.) Second, Syria has summoned its traditional Lebanese allies to Damascus to give the order to bring their followers to Hizballah's rally. Khoury ticked off a long list of names of pro-Syrian figures (Suleiman Franjieh, Omar Karami, Talal Arslan, etc.) who he insisted trooped to Damascus for instructions over the past few days.

EVEN MIKATI TRAVELS TO DAMASCUS

16. (S) One surprising figure, even for Khoury, was former PM Najib Mikati, who has studiously kept his distance from Damascus since December (probably as much, we believe, due to his political ambitions than to a serious rift with Syria; we believe that Mikati for our benefit exaggerates how independent he has become of Damascus' orbit). Mikati traveled to Damascus a few days ago, Khoury insisted. Bashar al-Asad's orders must have been extremely strong for Mikati to have responded, Khoury noted. We note that, in addition, Mikati has often expressed fear of Shia strength and, while an occasional visitor to Nasrallah's (now demolished) headquarters, he has not previously attended such rallies.

GUESSES BUT LITTLE KNOWLEDGE
OF WHAT NASRALLAH WILL SAY

¶7. (C) As to the content of Nasrallah's anticipated remarks (whether delivered by video or in person), our contacts disagree. Some say that he will give a predictable, rabble-rousing "victory" speech that, while unpalatable to our ears, will not cover new ground. Others suggest that Nasrallah will define an aggressive political agenda that could include the following elements: collapse of the Siniora government in favor of a national unity cabinet, promotion of Michel Aoun as Lebanon's next president, discrediting of some Lebanese politicians and/or the March 14 movement more generally for insufficient enthusiasm for Hizballah's "victory," etc. (We note that pro-Syrian newspapers here have, for the past few days, hinted at the existence of clandestine taped recordings of March 14 politicians expressing hope that Israel would badly damage, if not destroy Hizballah. If such tapes exist -- and we know that some of the allegations dealing with what the Ambassador supposedly said or heard by phone with March 14 politicians are complete fabrications -- Nasrallah could cause embarrassment by using his rally to play them.)

COMMENT

¶8. (S) The wide gamut of speculation indicates that no one really knows what the content of Nasrallah's remarks will be or whether his rally will significantly alter Lebanon's political landscape. Nasrallah and Syria seem to aim at a watershed event. While we share the analysis that Nasrallah will not want the demonstration to turn violent, we expect the rally to be a frightening show of force nonetheless. And if Nasrallah calls for a national unity government to the cheers of hundreds of thousands of people in a country with a population of only four million, the March 14 majority will be thrust back, weakened, on the defensive, after a few weeks of basking in a post-conflict strengthened position. After all, it sounds perfectly reasonable to many Lebanese not deeply versed in what are the political stakes to include Michel Aoun in the cabinet.

¶9. (S) While it is difficult to make assessments before the rally takes place, we suspect that, among other goals, this

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demonstration, in fact, is one important skirmish in what appears to be an increasingly heated battle just in its initial stages to forestall Lebanese approval of the special tribunal of international character to try suspects in Rafiq Hariri's assassination. Bringing Aoun into the cabinet makes it easier for Syria to exercise a veto over the tribunal, as long as Aoun remains willing to trade any principle for a chance at the Presidency. As for potential participants in the rally, probably no one is more uncomfortable than Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, who probably wishes that he had extended his trip to Switzerland (where he met up with his long-time mistress, Lebanon's ambassador to Bern) for a few more days in order to have an easy excuse for staying away. Saad Hariri, we note, has prudently decided to spend a few more days abroad. End comment.

FELTMAN